

## American Railroads

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As a contribution to the considerable literature on the subject, however, or even as a study aware of that literature, the book's limits are powerful and pervasive. The author largely ignores current scholarship on both the West and African-American history, chooses not to document his discussions of the subjects of the photos, and does not develop a conceptual framework for understanding either the particulars or the general context into which they might fit. His tendency toward historical generalizations unsupported by either evidence or allusion to scholarly examination even limits the work's utility as a reference. It is not essential, of course, that images relevant to Iowa be used in the collection, or that Iowa resources be explored, but without a larger analytical framework it is difficult to apply this study to Iowa.

*American Railroads*, by John F. Stover. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. xviii, 306 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, chronology, suggested readings, index. \$43.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PETER H. JAYNES, KIRKWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

In *American Railroads*, John Stover addresses the changing fortunes of American railroads from 1828 to the 1990s. However, he misses most of his opportunities to discuss the impact of the railroads on American life. Throughout the book he uses traditional, but essentially invalid, measures of railroad trackage as a basic indicator of railroad development. Even after he recognizes that these measures seriously understate the reality (182, 202), he does nothing to correct the previously used figures. Within one paragraph he contradicts himself when writing about "the all-time high" miles of trackage (202-3). In addition, he often refers to "operating ratio," but does not define it until page 162; and he speaks of "total investment" (36) and "capitalization" (64) without any frames of reference to give the figures meaning.

For the most part, the two additional chapters tacked onto the earlier edition (1961) are not integrated into the earlier material. Most of the tables and statistics stop about 1960 (204). Tables could have replaced many repetitious sentences, saving space in this brief work. Four pages devoted to portraits of nineteenth- and twentieth-century railroad leaders could have been used to flesh out the narrative, something it desperately needs. The few maps are essentially useless. Iowa is mentioned on 19 pages of the book, usually without saying very much about the state, its contributions to the railroads, or the railroads' contributions to Iowa. Exceptions are Iowa's role in the Granger movement (119-22) and in the development of air brakes (142).

The bibliography contains only two references that specifically relate to the period since 1970. While this work has *some* fairly good chapters (two and eight) and makes *some* useful points as it goes along, anyone interested in learning much about American railroads, especially in Iowa, will be well advised to look elsewhere.

*Great American Post Offices*, by James H. Bruns. New York: James Wiley & Sons, 1998. xiv, 274 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY WESLEY I. SHANK, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

In the first part of this two-part book, the "great" post offices are the historically important ones. The buildings, however, are secondary to the author's real topic: the social history of the United States postal service, our first information superhighway. In the book's second part, a guidebook organized geographically, the "great" post offices are 250 chosen from those extant. The buildings are the author's topic here. He gives the location, dates, architect's name, and interesting descriptive and historical information about each post office. In both parts of the book, the numerous photographs, engravings, and other pictures play a valuable role.

How would midwesterners use this book? Interested in social history, we might browse through some of the topical essays that make up the first part of the book, such as "Postal Offices across a Young Nation," "The Expanding System," or "Postal Service in the Civil War Years." Reading the essays successively, however, we may find their historical continuity unclear. Beginning with East Coast origins, the history follows the growth of the postal service across the continent, through the Midwest and beyond. Interested in the historic buildings in our own town or city, or in places we might visit, we would consult the second part of the book. It is organized by national regions and of course includes the Midwest. Doubtless drawing from his experience as a founding director of the National Postal Museum at the Smithsonian Institution, James H. Bruns has written a book that will appeal to a broad spectrum of thoughtful readers.

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